

THE FAIRY MARTIN *HIRUNDO ARIEL* IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA. THREE NEW SIGHT RECORDS AND A BRIEF REVIEW.

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Three new sight records of Fairy Martin, *Hirundo ariel*, believed to be only the fourth, fifth and sixth for PNG are presented below followed by a brief review of the Fairy Martin in Papua New Guinea.

On 26 September 1986 at Tabubil airstrip, Western Province, A. and L.M. Murray observed a Fairy Martin with a low-flying group of Uniform Swiftlets *Collocalia vanikorensis*. Clear views were obtained for some 15 minutes of its snow-white rump, dark wings and back, rust-red head and nape and pale underparts. Its tail was dark and square. Its flight was more direct than the swiftlets' and it glided frequently. This species has not previously been recorded from Tabubil. It is possible that the exceptionally dry month prior to this sighting and/or the noticeable southwards migration e.g. of Rainbow Bee-eaters *Merops ornatus* and Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrikes *Coracina novaehollandiae* were relevant factors.

On 28th October 1986 at 15:00 while driving through Tari, Southern Highlands Province, R. Hicks noticed a small white rumped hirundine hawking low over an area of long grass in the company of several Pacific Swallows *Hirundo tahitica*. A brief glance showed that the rump was clean white and when the bird turned its rufous cap could be seen, so erasing thoughts of a late Tree Martin *Hirundo nigricans*. The next day two individuals were observed from a distance of not more than 5 m for about half an hour while they were perched on the Tari airfield perimeter fence. The birds could not be re-located on either 30 or 31 October.

The following field notes were made:

The birds were noticeably smaller than the Pacific Swallows with which they were associated, but with a stockier and shorter-winged build similar to that of the Tree Martin, although there were none of this species present for comparison. Plumage details: The rufous cap extended from forehead to nape and just below the level of the eye. The mantle and back were black with some pale streaking where the rufous of the crown met the black of the mantle, giving a zig-zag collar effect. Flight feathers and both upper and lower tail were dark grey. The rump was clean white. Chin, throat and ear coverts were very finely streaked pale brown on white. The ear coverts were also smudged with rufous. The streaking ended at the top of the breast with a narrow white band. Just below this on the upper breast were some faint brown smudges. The rest of the underparts were clean white.

On 8 November 1986 at 12:30, Mike and Helen Hopkins and R. Hicks observed a flock of c. 70 Fairy Martins flying over the river c. 10 km south of Balamuk, Western Province. Shortly after the flock was seen perched on a derelict wire fence which allowed a more accurate estimate of c. 100 birds to

be made. Two Tree Martins were also present in the flock. These birds were much more jumpy than the Tari individuals and would not allow a close approach.

The Fairy Martin is a widespread species in Australia, although only a breeding season (August - April) visitor to the south-east of that country. (Pizzey 1980). It is a vagrant to PNG with only three records prior to the last quarter of 1986. The first of these records was of a single bird at Nomad River, Western Province on 10 May 1967 (Bell 1968). The second was of unspecified numbers at Weam, also Western Province, in mid-1970, (Lindgren 1970) and only c. 20 km north of the Bensbach floodplain sighting this year. The third record followed some 12 years later when a single individual was seen at Kanosia Lagoon, Central Province on 15 August 82. (Finch 1982). All three records are of birds associating with Tree Martins which are common non-breeding season (March-October) visitors to PNG (Beehler et al 1986). It is probable that these records refer to Fairy Martins that had become caught up in the Tree Martins northward migration. All records occurred in the southern winter.

The latest three records differ in that they all occurred in the southern spring, much later in the year than the previous records, at a time when the Fairy Martins should be well into their breeding season. The Tari and Tabubil records are considerably farther north than Fairy Martins have previously been recorded, the individual at Tabubil being only 5° S of the equator. The record from Tari is further unique in that there were no Australian breeding species present. These Fairy Martins were associating with Pacific Swallows, a species which is not known to migrate and has not yet been admitted to the Australian list. This suggests there may have been a large influx of Fairy Martins in the southern autumn of 1986 and it will be interesting to see if any further records come to light following the publication of this note.

- Beehler, B.M., T.K. Pratt & D.A. Zimmerman (1986). **Birds of New Guinea** Princeton University Press.
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Lindgren, E. (1970). Observations. *PNGBS Newsletter* 59: 1.
Pizzey, G. (1980). **A Field Guide to the Birds of Australia**. Collins.